



Book Review

REVIEWED BY RABBI ISRAEL ZOBERMAN

Soviet Jews heroic struggle

Jewish Luck (A True Story of Friendship, Deception, and Risky Business). By Leslie Levine Adler and Meryll Levine Page. Salt Mine Press. 2013. pp. 371.

What a painstaking labor of love to weave an unforgettable account of a penetrating model friendship that has survived the critical test of time. This took place in the most harrowing context of the Soviet Jews' heroic struggle for freedom to leave their native land. In it their mere Jewish identity – weak as it was – subjected them to additional hardships. However, the anti-Semitic discrimination they encountered rekindled in them their Jewish attachment and a fortified yearning to break oppressive Soviet chains.

The book's drama began in 1976 with Leslie Levine of Minneapolis who was a student at the University of Michigan majoring in Russian Area Studies. She excitedly embarks on a study opportunity at the prestigious Leningrad State University. She was not connected to the Refusniks movement and the equally admirable visits by American Jews offering indispensable support and basic Jewish supplies, though Leslie proved no less courageous and resourceful. She was buoyed by the human rights Helsinki Accords of August 1975, representing a thaw in the Cold War and the closing of circle of sorts for Leslie whose paternal grandparents arrived in the United States from Russia's Pale of Settlement in 1905.

The both serendipitous and providential appearance of Vera, a Russian Jewish student, to help Leslie and fellow American traveler Lars with directions in the foreign and impressive city of Leningrad (St. Petersburg), commenced a clandestine bond protected from the ever present and feared KGB. Soon Vera and her fellow Russian Jewish student and friend Alisa (Alla), along with their families, would become deeply involved with Leslie and her fellow American students Lars Peterson and R. D. Zimmerman.



Opinion

PROFESSOR ARNOLD AGES

Why are Abbas and The Arab League opposed to recognizing Israel as a Jewish State?

Theology used to be called "The Queen of the Sciences" in the medieval university, indicating its primacy during that epoch. In the modern period this concept has more or less been replaced, except among



Following much challenge and upheaval for both tenacious Russian Jewish women, Alisa ends up happily married with a daughter in Stockholm, Sweden, imbued with a strong sense of her Jewishness, while Vera (an assumed name for her safety) along with her loving husband and son end up in the Caribbean Cayman Island. This was mainly for tax purposes and peaceful living. Vera becomes a very wealthy business woman though not as Jewishly motivated as Alisa. Vera reflects the ambivalent "Jewish condition" of so many former Soviet Jews who were deprived of a positive Jewish experience.

In more than one way, this illuminating book containing multiple dramas. Unfolding and fit for a film production, the book ought to be required reading for students and all those interested in this pivotal period in Jewish history. It is also an enjoyable, delightful reading experience. The remarkable and gifted co-authors deserve our gratitude. They are sisters, Dr. Leslie Levine Adler, a psychologist and Meryll Levine Page, a Yale University graduate who taught Soviet history. The rich bibliography, historical information and photos are valuable assets.

The title of the book, *Jewish Luck* traditionally and historically implies lack of luck, but in this case actually conveys good luck for the protagonists in a true tale of imaginary proportions. My father Yechiel, a Polish Holocaust survivor, fought outside Leningrad as a Red Army soldier and I was born in Kazakhstan in 1945 when it was still part of the USSR.

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ecclesiastical circles, by political science, international law and dispute resolution.

I have a lingering unease that one of the few areas in which theology still dominates is in the Arab world and in the Middle East imbroglio. (The Irish case seems to have diminished somewhat.) The violent clashes between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq and several other Muslim jurisdictions over the succession to the Prophet Mohammed are based on a theological disagreement about family lineage. Outsiders might deem this to be a minor family dispute but for the true believer succession rights are thought to be worth dying for.

The obdurateness of segments of the Presbyterian synod in the United States and the United Church in Canada towards Israel shows that theological rigidity about Jews and Judaism is also very much alive today as both groups issue condemnations of Israel redolent of 20 centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. Their librettos – the BDS propaganda and the Israel Apartheid charge – are more nuanced today but the odious music is exactly the same.

But since 1963–1964 and the Second Vatican Council we have learned that deeply held theological biases and the strident teaching of contempt towards Judaism can be neutralized and the proof lies in the righteous leadership of several of the recent Popes in Rome who have uttered the *chatanu* prayer – we have sinned towards Jews. Yes it took almost 2,000 years and the Holocaust to produce this repentance but it is nonetheless a welcome gesture, as is the Vatican's recognition of the State of Israel in the 1980s.

We can learn from the above that congealed theology can be thawed and reconfigured to reveal more positive and spiritually nuanced thinking.

But not, it appears, in the Arab Middle East where frozen ideas about Jews resist any kind of reconsideration and where anti-Jewish myths and stereotypes unfortunately form part of the psychic image of Jews and Judaism. This syndrome is augmented by the availability of Arab versions of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the scurrilous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in a wide array of bookstores in the Arab Levant. Anti-Semitic rhetoric is all too common, moreover, among some Muslim preachers.

It is instructive that Abbas and his advisors have made it clear that in any two state solution, the Palestinian State would be Judenrein (no Jews allowed) – the concept embraced by Nazi executioners Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Eichmann. This is a very sad commentary inasmuch as Jews once lived in relative amity in Muslim cultures in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. It appears

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